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ABSTRACT

This paper basically addressed itself to the question of why so many young people drop out of school. It appears that the great majority drop out because they simply cannot tolerate more failure and the commensurate feelings of low self-worth and self-esteem. It was emphasized that success experiences for elementary school youngsters are important because they can be numbered among those positive early happenings upon which an increasingly more complex psychological superstructure can be built. The negative effects of elementary school letter grades were discussed and it was noted that low marks function more as a threat of failure than as a motivation for improvement. It was concluded on the basis of both clinical and empirical evidence that the effects of early school failure experiences have long-term consequences for both a child's subsequent achievement in school and eventual mental health. Six major implications for school counselors are listed. (BW/Author)

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EFFECT OF EARLY SCHOOL FAILURE EXPERIENCES ON SELF-IMAGE DEVELOPMENT AND IMPLICATIONS FOR SCHOOL COUNSELORS

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It is a curious and sad paradox to note that, in a land where education is so highly valued and so much the key to one's personal advancement and society's total growth, approximately one-third of those students who start first grade this year will drop out before reaching the eleventh grade. If history repeats itself, as it has a knack for doing, these students will drop out not because of a sudden whim or capricious impulse, but because of more or less continuous exposure to failure experiences which reinforce feelings of worthlessness and inadequacy. On the average, over one million young people leave school each year. One of the first explanations for this staggering number is that those who drop out are ones who cannot benefit from educational experiences anyway. Were it that simple. The fact is, well over half those who drop out have average to above average mental ability. For example, in a U. S. Department of Labor study of seven widely dispersed, middlesized cities, six percent of the dropouts were found to have IQ's over 110 and 55 percent had IQ's over 90.[1] This means that 61 percent who dropped out had the necessary intellectual equipment to complete high school.

The question is, why do so many young people drop out of school? Some, we know, leave because they're bored. Others leave because they're angry or emotionally disturbed or both and it is doubtful whether any school program -- no matter how good -- could hold them. The great majority, however, drop out because they simply cannot tolerate more failure and the

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commensurate feelings of low self-worth and self-esteem. This being the case, it should come as no surprise to note that one of the major findings of Bachman's[2] four-year study of dropouts was that dropouts' self-esteem got higher once they were out of school. In fact, measures of self-esteem of those who graduated were not much higher than those who had dropped out. What a sorry commentary it is to think that a student must leave school in order to feel better about himself! And what a tragedy it is to find, as one study did, that about forty percent of those who drop out cite adverse school experiences as their reason for leaving the educational fold.[3]

I have stressed the dropout and the dropout problem to this point because it is one very explicit and dramatic consequence of failure experiences which occur too early and too frequently among those who leave school. What we haven't mentioned are those hundreds of thousands of children who are victimized by early school failure experiences, but who do not choose so dramatic an exit as dropping out. Rather, they persist on through school, suffering quietly and inwardly, and eventually graduate into a competitive society which demands not only a reasonable level of competence in some kind of work, but also a certain degree of confidence in one's ability to do the work. Unfortunately, thousands of young people graduate after thirteen years of school feeling somewhat helpless, hopeless, and defeated. Feelings like these, whether among those who drop out because they can't tolerate more failure or among those who stay in and suffer through it, start during the early school years.

For example, although studies indicate that approximately 70 percent

of all dropouts complete at least a ninth grade education, there is increasing evidence to show that the negative attitudes about school and thoughts about leaving it begin early in a child's school experiences. Wolfbein concluded from a series of dropout studies that:

> " . . . the problems which finally result in a dropout begin, and are quite overt, way back in the elementary grades. In fact, it is quite early in grade school that many of the potential dropouts begin to fall behind in their scholastic achievements. . . "4

In an intensive study of 45 girls and 60 boys who were about to drop out of school, Lichter,[5] found that the reason was not the result of any specific learning failure, but rather a broad educational disability which, for boys in particular, started in elementary school.

William Glasser, in his sensitive book, Schools Without Failure, stresses over and over that the first years of school are critical for success or failure. He notes, for example, that:

> "The critical years are between ages five and ten. Failure . . . can usually be corrected during these five years within elementary school classrooms by teaching and educational procedures that lead to fulfillment of the child's basic needs. The age beyond which failure is difficult to reverse may be higher or lower than ten for any one child, depending upon the community he comes from, the strength of his family, and his own genetic resources; regardless of these variations, however, it is amazing to me how constant this age seems to be. Before age ten, a good school experience can help him succeed."6

Why Elementary School Success Is So Crucial

Success experiences for elementary school youngsters are important because they can be numbered among those positive early happenings upon which an increasingly more complex psychological superstructure can be

built. In order to build a firm house, we give it a firm foundation which rests squarely on solid ground. The same is true for the human psyche. In order for it to be strong, it must begin with a firm foundation. Some adults, as we all know, have very shakey foundations and these must be repaired before further growth is possible. The point I'm trying to make is that what happens to a child during his elementary school years is critical because it is his foundation-laying years. Everything that happens to him is simply incorporated as part of the basic personality foundation pour that occurs, as far as school is concerned at least, during the years from five to twelve, or from grades one through six. These are the years when the footings of a child's personality are either firmly established in experiences of success, accomplishment, and pride in himself or flimsily planted in shifting sands of self-doubt, failure, and feelings of worthlessness.

An elementary age child is in the early phases of forming his concept of self. This is not to say that he is a selfless soul who has no sense of identity whatsoever, but it is to suggest that <u>his sense of who he is and what he can do is incompletely formed</u>. Characteristically, an elementary age youngster is quite malleable and impressionable. He is not only ready to please adults, but to <u>believe</u> them as well. Indeed, what adults say about him or how they evaluate either his person or performance is incorporated more readily, more easily, and more uncritically than at any other stage during his developmental years. This means that the feedback a child receives from peers and adults -- particularly significant adults like parents and teachers -- is more likely to have a greater impact

because it is more readily absorbed into a developing self-system, which, precisely because it <u>is</u> still developing and incomplete, is more open to imput and more available to change.

An elementary school-age child is not well defended psychologically. In the absense of a consolidated and reasonably well-integrated self-image, he is less likely to use active and assertive mechanisms such as denial or projection in order to protect himself from ego-damaging experiences and more likely to use the passive and more primitive mechanism of regression, which allows him to stay at a safer and more dependent level of development. (Indeed, whether in children or adults, regressive behavior is not an uncommon phenomenon following failure experiences.) In order to use a defense mechanism, one first of all has to have a reasonably well-defined self to begin with. This is not to suggest that the elementary age child is totally incapable of compensating for his failure or displacing his anger or projecting blame for poor work on the teacher. It is a matter of degree. If a second grader fails a spelling test, he is more likely to "believe" that mark (that is, incorporate it, internalize it) than is a twelfth grade boy with a positive view of himself and a history of doing well in school, who fails a geometry test. The twelfth grader can blame his performance on a fluke, deny its importance, rationalize his lack of study, or project it on his teacher. So long as his performance is inconsistent with his concept of self, he can defend himself against the loss of self-esteem. The second grader, on the other hand, does not yet have a well-defined self with which he can or has to be consistent. Hence, whether it is a failure or success experience, the elementary age child can

offer far less resistance to its impact and will be a much less critical recepient of its place in his evolving sense of self. Perhaps another way of stating this would be to suggest that an elementary age child does not yet have a consolidated self-system to serve as the framework within which he can evaluate another person's evaluations of him. For example, if you say something negative about me, I must first of all have some idea of who I am (a consolidated self-system) in order to evaluate what the meaning of your comment is for me.

The six to twelve year old age group represents a growth phase which psychiatrist Erik Erikson[7] refers to as the "industry vs. inferiority" stage. In other words this is a natural time in a child's growth and development when he learns either to be industrious, productive, and autonomous, or inferior-feeling, withdrawn, and dependent. The major danger of this period, as Erikson sees it, is the development of a sense of inadequacy and inferiority in a child who does not receive recognition for his efforts. Again we are reminded of how incredibly important a teacher's feedback is to a child at this point in his development.

Early school success is crucial for three basic reasons: 1) subsequent success is not only easier to build on to early success, but it also seems more possible to the student; 2) early success gives him not only a sense of competence and accomplishment, but also establishes a precedent with which he can strive to be consistent;* 3) early school success makes any later school failures more bearable because they are more likely to occur within a consolidated self-system buttressed by

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*The idea of self consistency is explored in greater depth in D. E. Hamachek, Encounters with the Self, New York: Holt, Rinehart, and Winston, 1971, Chapter Three.

achievement and fortified by personal accomplishment.

As noble or as worthy as early school success may be, it unfortunately is not available to all children. Two widely used practices, grading and nonpromotion, doom thousands of children to failure at a very time in their lives when they are apt to be most lastingly influenced by it. Both of these practices are notorious for their negative effects on a young child's personality, motivation, and subsequent achievement.

Effects of Elementary School Letter Grades

Letter grades enter into many aspects of the mental health and self-concept development of elementary pupils. For bright children with high achievement needs, letter grades are no problem. They usually receive high marks and enjoy the challenge of competing for them. For many other children, however, letter grades are continual reminders to them that they are not doing as well as the others and that they are slow learners. As one second grader expressed it after receiving four D's and one F on his report card, "I must really be dumb." In ways like this, a child's performance gets translated into feeling and over a long enough period of time the perception of "dumbness" is converted into a conception of "dumbness," which is far more difficult to change.

Alexander[8] has quite correctly noted that low marks function more as a threat of failure than as motivation for improvement. More often than not they are actually punishment for previous failure, poor past environment or emotional problems. As a young elementary school child continues to experience failure, he begins to perceive himself as a poor achiever. Once a negative self-perception sets in, he will, in all likelihood, continue to perform at a low level no matter what his ability.

The low-ability student confronted with letter grades is defeated before he begins. The marking system with its normative criteria leads continually to more difficult goals for the lower-achieving student and also for the student who simply is not developmentally ready to take on certain subjects.

In spite of our lip-service to the documented evidence which supports the concept of wide individual differences in growth among elementary age youngsters, some schools nonetheless persist in behaving as if all children were ready for the same curriculum at the same time. Nothing could be further from the truth. As one small example of the wide disparities in academic readiness among elementary children, a typical fifth grade class may reflect a range of reading skills all the way from those who are still at the second grade level to those who are reading at the high school level. In fact, reading test data indicates that we might expect to find as many as 42 percent of a fifth grade reading below grade level![9] This does not necessarily mean that students in this 42 percent are less smart than their fellows, it may only mean that developmentally they still have some growing to do and have not yet completed the business of putting it all together in order to cognitively handle the symbol manipulation necessary for reading at grade level.

All in all, the letter-grade system in elementary schools is an almost certain method of guaranteeing that up to forty percent of all elementary age children will be exposed to failure, and thus encouraged to incorporate a failure attitude as a part of their self-image during their most impressionable years of development. There are many undesirable

effects of letter grades in elementary school; Hedges enumerates six of them:

1. There is a relationship between letter grades and the dropout problem. The students who ultimately drop out of school are those who receive most of the failing grades.
2. Letter grades encourage cheating. Children in situations where they are doomed to failure will cheat rather than admit to their parents that they are failures.
3. Letter grades do not reflect the uniqueness of each child. They tend to evaluate people by similar standards, blurring their uniqueness.
4. Motivation based on fear of failure is psychologically unsound. Children who become fearful or over-anxious about grades tend to manifest symptoms ranging from open aggression (acting-out-behavior) to withdrawal.
5. Letter grades are an inadequate basis for communicating with parents and may mislead rather than inform.
6. Letter grades invite invidious comparisons. The child who cannot achieve as well as others because he has a lower I.Q., yet is always being compared unfavorably with others of the same chronoligical age, is being subjected to humiliation about a situation that is out of his control. There is evidence that continued frustration and failure tend to have a detrimental effect on a child's ability to learn. 10

Melby is probably as specific as any concerned person can be in pointing out the dangers of letter grades in elementary school when he observed that:

> "The marking system is not only irrelevant and mischievous. It is destructive. It destroys the self-concepts of millions of children every year. Note the plight of the deprived child. He often enters school at six with few of the preschool experiences that the middle-class children bring to school. We ask him to learn to read. He is not ready to read. We give him a low mark -- we repeat the low mark for each marking period -- often for as long as the child remains in school. At the end of perhaps the ninth grade, the child drops out of school. What has he learned? He has learned he cannot learn. We have told him so several dozen times. Why should he think otherwise?"11

Effects of Elementary School Nonpromotion Practices

A popular educational assumption underlying the practice of non-promotion is that the retained student, in re-covering material, is better able to overcome his deficits in subject matter savvy than he would be were he passed on and exposed to new material. Research has consistently shown that such an assumption is built more on myth than fact. Some of the evidence:

1. The average repeater learns no more in two years than does the average nonrepeater of the same mental age in one year.[12]
2. Nonpromotion does not reduce the range of abilities within a particular grade level; that is, grades with a high proportion of repeaters are as apt to have as wide a range of ability differences as grades with a low proportion of repeaters.[13]
3. Failed students during two years following failure do not progress significantly greater than promoted matchees during the single year spent in the next grade.[14]
4. A policy of "achieve or fail" seems to have a more negative effect on students who are being retained than those who are not. Although there is a trend toward increased achievement in the school with an "achieve or fail" policy, the increase is limited largely to those who are in no real danger of being retained anyway.[15]
5. Achievement does not decrease when students ceased to be threatened by the possibility of nonpromotion; e.g.,:
   a. No difference in reading ability was found over a ten-year period when a school changed to a 100 percent promotion policy.[16]
   b. Children who were told at the beginning of a school year that all would be promoted did as well on comprehensive achievement

tests as those who were reminded throughout the year that they would not be promoted if they didn't do good work.[17]

6. Retention of students because of their inability to achieve academically can have undesirable effects on their personal-social adjustment.[18,19]
7. Teachers and peers tend to develop unfavorable attitudes toward nonpromoted students, which encourages nonpromoted students to develop increasingly more negative attitudes toward school and even an eager anticipation towards dropping out.[20]
8. Of those who repeat beyond the first grade, about 35 percent show some improvement, about 53 percent show little or no improvement, and about 12 percent do poorer work.[21]
9. Lack of motivation and subsequent poor school achievement is positively related to a student's experience with nonpromotion; e.g.,
   a. Of those students dropping out between grades 8 and 9, all had experienced nonpromotion at least once and over four-fifths had experienced nonpromotion twice.[22]
   b. Out of 2,000 children who began first grade at the same time in the same school system, 643 dropped out before completing high school. All but five of these dropouts, 638, or 99 percent, had been retained in the first grade. As a combined total, these 643 students failed a total of more than 1,800 grades during their first six years of school. This averages out for each dropout failing every other year for six years![23]

c. Over 74 percent of the dropouts in one school system repeated at least one grade as compared to only 18 percent among students who graduated from high school.[24]

d. More than 1,200 students in grades six and seven from 14 representative schools in a North Carolina study were investigated to differentiate between repeaters and non-repeaters. Results showed that those who had been retained were reading at a 6.8 grade level; those repeating one grade scored at a 5.2 level, and those who had repeated two or more grades dropped to a 4.5 grade level. On mathematics achievement, nonrepeaters averaged in the 27th percentile; those repeating one grade were in the 10th percentile; and those repeating two or more grades dropped to the 5th percentile. All in all, the data do not indicate that retention helps a student "catch up" academically -- the usual justification for having students repeat. Failing was also found to have a strong influence on a student's feelings of self-worth. For example, on all the sub-scales of the Tennessee Self-Concept Scale, students who repeated grades scored lower than those who had not. Students repeating two or more grades scored far below the mean on each sub-scale.[25]

The list of indictments against nonpronotion practices in elementary school are long and convincing. Whether nonpromotion is looked at on the basis of subsequent academic achievement or emotional-social consequences,

the general view leads to a rather dismal picture of grade retention as a means for facilitating a child's psychological or intellectual growth. Repeating a grade is an event of enormous import to a child. It is a failure experience which lasts not just a day or week, but one which persists for an entire academic year and is remembered for a lifetime. It can be a particularly bad experience for those children who must return to the same school, the same curriculum, and the same teacher. For the student who fails to master the work of an academic year with his classmates Symonds has quite correctly observed:

> "Something must be changed. He must be given a chance to learn from fresh, unfamiliar material, or the methods of instruction must be changed. Perhaps he would learn better with a different teacher. Probably he needs more detailed explanation or closer guidance. Somewhere he failed to comprehend and as a result made an inappropriate response. The emphasis should be on remedial instruction rather than nonpromotion."26

Research supports Symonds' observation; that is, if a nonpromoted student repeats a more or less identical program his second year, the evidence indicates that under these conditions he generally makes no more progress than he would had he been promoted.[27] On the other hand, there is evidence to indicate that the nonpromoted pupil has a better chance of improving when exposed to a different kind of program the second year.[28] There is also evidence to suggest that deleterious social and emotional effects of repeating a grade can be lessened for the child when the reason for school failure is based primarily on his immaturity for the grade in which he has been placed.[29] That is, if a child understands that he is repeating because "he has got some growing to do," then the overall negative impact of grade repetition can be reduced.

Consequences of Early School Failure Experiences

With mind-boggling consistency, research concerned with mental health and adjustment shows that adults who fail were usually children who failed. For example, Robins[30] studied 500 guidance patients thirty years after they had been brought to attention as children for deviant behavior and reported that the more severe the maladjustment in childhood, the more disturbed was the adult adjustment. Clinic children, as opposed to a matched normal population, experienced more arrests, were more alienated from family and friends, had more occupational problems, and were hospitalized more frequently for mental problems. The children referred for antisocial behavior had a very low level of school achievement and many failed to make it even through elementary school.

These conclusions are similar to Powell's[31] findings which indicated that failure in school is also likely to contribute to a rejection of norms of the larger society, and normlessness appears to be related to crime. This is not to say that all crime or even most of it is due to low educational achievement. Rather, the evidence suggests that since there is a limited range of life alternatives for individuals with failure-studded histories, they may be more tempted to fill their ego needs and status aspirations through such illegal activities as gambling, prostitution, robbery, dealing in narcotics, etc.

There is also evidence to relate school failure experiences to juvenile delinquency. For example, Spiegelman[32] found a high negative correlation between educational attainment and the probability of being arrested for committing a major juvenile crime. Even when differences in the probability

of being arrested due to other factors (e.g., race, family income, family size, presence of both parents at home, IQ scores) were considered it was found that high school dropouts were three to five times more likely to be arrested for committing a juvenile crime. Since delinquents do not seem to be any less intelligent than the general population, but are more likely to fail in school, the potential role of the schools in preventing delinquency is strongly implied.[33]

Kolberg's, et al.,[34] monumental review of literature related to the predictability of adult mental health from childhood behavior noted that research rather consistently found a moderate association between early low school achievement and almost every obvious expression of adult maladjustment except suicide and neurosis. However, it is not the low school achievement itself which is related to later adult maladjustment, but rather those behavioral factors which most likely cause low school achievement, as, for instance, low IQ, lack of attention, difficulty with authority figures, and general rule-defying behavior. In other words, early school failure is not a cause of later adult maladjustment, but, rather, symptomatic of personal and interpersonal problems which could lead to it. However, Kolberg makes the excellent point that "because underachievement is associated with defects in these ego-strength variables (trouble with authority figures, lack of attention, etc.), underachievement is a statistical predictor of all major forms of adult maladjustment (and) it seems likely that early school failure is itself an environmental cause of later low status . . ."[35]

Sometimes those children who fail in elementary school are difficult

not to fail precisely because of their general slowness or recalcitrant behavior. On the other hand, they are precisely the children who should not fail, particularly at a time in their lives when they are most susceptible to its effects. Longitudinal research findings indicate that there is something like a critical period for the formation of abilities and attitudes for school learning which occurs in or is set or stabilized sometime between the ages of five to nine. For example, Bloom's[36] surveys of longitudinal research suggest that adolescent or adult intelligence is about 50 percent stabilized or predictable by the first grade, whereas adolescent school achievement is predictable to the same extent only at age nine or about the end of grade three. This means that factors which contribute to school achievement other than intelligence are to a considerable extent stabilized during the first three grades. In large measure, these factors are sheer skill factors, which are cumulative in nature. That is, if a child has more skills in the first grade, he accumulated further skills in the second, and more in the third, and so on. Again Kolberg makes an observation which needs to be stressed at this juncture:

> In large part, however, this stabilization of school achievement is based on the stabilization of factors of interest in learning, attention, and sense of competence."[37]

What this all points to is the establishment during the early school years of an attitudinal set which can have either a positive or negative valence and which can influence, for good or evil, subsequent school achievement. Apparently, a child's feelings about his ability to do school work are rooted in his early school experiences and these determine, to a great extent, both the intensity and direction of his emerging self-

image as a student.

When it comes to assessing the importance of early success experiences for later adult behavior, Bower has observed:

> " . . . . there is increasing clincal and research evidence to support the hypothesis that children who find healthful satisfactions in relationships with family, neighborhood, and school, will as adults find these same satisfactions; and that the children who find frustration and defeat in these primary institutions also tend to be defeated as adults.38

Effects of Success and Failure or Self-Image Development

There is evidence to suggest that a low or negative self-image can have adverse affects on a child's school performance even at a very young age. For example, Wattenberg and Clifford[39] found that an unfavorable view of self is already established in some children before they enter first grade. Evidence for this was in their findings which indicated that measures of self-concept and ego-strength made at the beginning of kindergarten were more predictive of reading achievement two and one-half years later than were measures of intelligence.

If a child starts with a negative self-image about his ability to do school work, we might expect that the signs of low or poor academic achievement will be apparent during the early elementary years. For example, Shaw and McCuen[40] reasoned that if it is true that academic underachivement is related to basic personality structure, then such behavior is likely to occur during the early school years. To check this out they took a group of eleventh- and twelfth-grade students who had been in the same school system since the first grade and who scored in the upper quarter of an intelligence test administered in the eighth grade and divided them into

achiever and under-achiever groups, which were separated for males and females: thirty-six male achievers, thirty-six male under-achievers, forty-five female achievers, and seventeen female under-achievers. The mean grade point averages were computed for each group at each grade level. They found that there were significant differences between male achievers' and under-achievers' grade point average at the third grade, while non-significant differences were noted as early as the third grade. The grade point difference between the two groups increased at each grade level from grade three up to grade ten, where there was a slight decrease. There were no significant differences between female achievers and under-achievers before grade nine, although nonsignificant differences were apparent in grade six. These differences between the two groups of girls continued to increase through grade eleven. As you can see, a pattern of low achievement for boys can begin as early as the first grade, is definitely present by third grade, and becomes increasingly more serious into the high school years. For girls the problem may exist as early as grade six and is definitely present and of increasing importance from grades nine to eleven.

The direction a child's self-image starts in is usually the direction in which it continues. Glidewell and Stringer,[41] for instance, found that a significant relationship was demonstrated between an overall estimate of mental health and academic progress over a three year period. They concluded that a child who experienced early school success over a number of years was not only apt to have a higher self-concept than a child who experienced early school failure, but was also more likely to be immunized against subsequent emotional problems.

Still other research points to the relationship between a student's self-image and his success or failure experiences in school. In a longitudinal project which involved studying the same students from the time they were seventh-graders through grade twelve, Brookover and his associates came up with the following findings and conclusions:

> The correlation between self-concept of ability and grade point average ranges from .48 to .63 over the six years. It falls below .50 only among boys in the 12th grade. . . In addition, the higher correlation between perceived evaluations and self-concepts tends to support the theory that perceived evaluations are a necessary and sufficient condition for (the growth of a positive or high) self-concept of ability, but (a positive) self-concept of ability is only a necessary, but <u>not</u> a sufficient condition for achievement. The latter is further supported by the analysis of the achievement of students with high and low self-concept of ability. This revealed that although a significant proportion of students with high self-concepts of ability achieved at a relatively lower level, practically none of the students with lower (less positive) self-concepts of ability achieved at a high level. 42

An inevitable question in any discussion related to self-concept and school success or failure is the one which asks what comes first, a positive self-concept or success experiences in school? It is not possible to give a definitive answer to this question because the fact is, we just don't know for sure. However, even though it is not possible to say with precision which come first, good school work or high self-regard, <u>it does not seem unreasonable to suggest that each is mutually reinforcing to the extent that a positive change in one facilitates a positive change in the other</u>. That is, if a child begins school with a low level of self-confidence and self-regard and experiences sufficient success, we could reasonably expect that his concept of self as far as school ability is concerned will be elevated. On the other hand, an equally plausible possibility is that

if a youngster begins school with high confidence in his ability to do school work and experiences excessive failure his concept of self may be lowered. Under these conditions he will either have to shift his focus to other areas, usually nonacademic, to maintain his self-esteem, or continue to lose self-confidence and self-esteem.

Unfortunately, not all children are able to sample the fruits of success in school. Many do -- the bright ones, the ones who are developmentally and intellectually "ready" for the demands of their grade, and the one who come from stimulating homes where they can interact with interested, involved parents. But, as Jersild has noted:

> Many other children find the educational scene so filled with failure, so full of reminders of their limitations, and so harsh in giving those reminders, that they hate school. School is such a threat to their self-picture that it is almost intolerable, but they drag themselves back to school day after day because the alternative of not going would be even more painful and threatening.43

Implications for School Counselors

On the basis of both clinical and empirical evidence it appears unequivocally clear that the effects of early school failure experiences have long-term consequences for both a child's subsequent achievement in school and eventual mental health. This being the case, I see the following six major implications for school counselors:

1. Every elementary school should have a counseling staff whose primary purpose is to support, maintain, and enhance the self-image development of children.
2. A counseling staff can and should be one of the major spokesmen for advocating practices which makes it possible for each child

to experience his fair share of success, particularly between the years of five to twelve.

3. Counselors can play an important role in getting schools to re-examine their grading and promotion practices in order to encourage and promote practices which have more to do with a child's developmental readiness for learning and less to do with parents' demands for a certain kind of grading and reporting system.
4. Counselors can play an increasingly important part in sensitizing teachers to the enormous negative consequences which occur from repeated early failure experiences.
5. In a similar sense, counselors can probably play a vital role in helping parents understand the importance of a child's early years as far as subsequent self-image development and school achievement are concerned.
6. It appears that if we want to reduce the number of students who drop out of school, our counseling efforts should be more vigorously applied in elementary school, particularly in identifying and working with students who attend academically competitive schools where they are evaluated more in terms of how they do in relation to others rather than in terms of their own growth and readiness for learning.

Summary

1. Simply stated, children who fail are likely candidates to end up as adults who fail.

2. Competitive letter grades in elementary schools doom a certain percentage of children to failure at a very time in life when they need as many success experiences as possible. (Some schools, I've found, even grade art work!)
3. A failure attitude can be prevented up to about age ten or twelve, but after that it becomes increasingly more difficult to change.
4. A child is most susceptible to feedback regarding his worth, abilities, and skills between the ages of five to ten or twelve primarily because his self-image is incompletely formed and easily influenced by how others, particularly significant others like parents and teachers, evaluate him. Adult <u>perceptions</u> are easily converted into his self-<u>conceptions</u>.
5. Consistent success experiences lead to reasonable levels of aspiration and realistic goal-setting, while consistent failure experiences lead to unpredictable levels of aspiration and unrealistic goal-setting.
6. A child's "school-ability" self-image is formed during his elementary school years.
7. A child tends to perform at a level more or less consistent with his school-ability self-image.
8. Over 70 percent of all high school dropouts "fail" one or more elementary grades.
9. Nonpromotion at any stage of elementary school seems to cause problems in later years of education.
10. Although teachers cannot always control whether or not a young

child fails, it appears that they have an incredible degree of control over how a child <u>feels</u> about himself after failure experiences.

11. Every elementary school needs a trained counseling staff to work directly with those children, who, by virtue of genes, circumstances, bad parenting, emotional problems, lack of motivation, or lack of academic readiness are experiencing difficulty in school.

12. Elementary school success experiences seem to be a mandatory pre-requisite to subsequent success in later school years and adulthood.

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